

## His Assessment Work

By F. E. Hovey

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"Take down that notice!"

The voice which spoke the command was indignant and imperative, but Pete Long paid not the slightest attention to it and coolly went on with his work. When he had driven in the last nail which held the notice paper firmly to the board he had affixed to an upright post he topped his four foot monument with another stone, picked up his rifle and stepped forward a few paces. "I'll do no such a darned thing," he said.

"But you will, though!"

"I'll not! I've relocated this claim,"

"You can't relocate it. It belongs to Bert Leonard."

"You don't say?" And he looked down contemptuously at the small figure in jumper and overalls standing in front of the tunnel.

She put up a little grimy hand and pushed back the sombrero from her damp forehead, where her yellow curls clung in wet rings. It had been so hot working in the tunnel.

"You take down that notice right away, this minute!" she ordered, her fearless blue eyes looking straight into the man's. "This claim is Leonard's, I tell you!"

"It ain't. It's lapsed."

"It has not."

"It has, though. He ain't done his assessment work."

"His assessment work is done."

"That's too thin, with him down in the hospital all smashed up and a broken leg and not a bean to pay a man to do it. Give us a rest."

"I tell you it's done. I—I did it."

"You?" with a sneer, then in a slow, insulting drawl. "I always did hear you was crazy after Bert Leonard."

The blood rushed to Lee Burrell's face, mounting even to the roots of her hair, but her direct gaze never faltered, and she lifted her head a little more proudly as she said:

"I do like Bert Leonard. We're to be married as soon as he gets well and



"I'll end this thing one way or another pretty quick."

works the claim up and sells it, and that'll be easy enough, for it's rich."

The wolfish gleam in the man's eyes showed her the madness of her unguarded words, and her glance swerved to her rifle, which was leaning against a rock a few feet from her.

"Don't you budge a step," said Pete. "That gun's all right."

He dropped on one knee and, raising his rifle to his shoulder, pointed it in assumed playfulness at her. "So the claim's rich?" he asked.

"And what business is that of yours?"

"Lots of business. Ain't it mine? Haven't I relocated it? See here, Miss Lee Burrell, none of your funny business. Give me the straight tip. The claim's rich, you say. Had some of the rock assayed?" And he played meaningfully with the hammer of his rifle.

She nodded her head, then burst out desperately: "And what if it is? It's not yours."

"You needn't try to hide nothin'. You bet I know the claim's rich. And if it ain't mine now I'll make it mine. Nobody knows you done this assessment."

Her telltale face told him what she would have given much to hide. It was true no one knew what she had been doing for the past few weeks. Her old father, accustomed to let her come and go unquestioned, had supposed her out on the range seeing to the cattle. And the doctor wouldn't allow her to talk business to Bert when she went to see him on Sundays.

"And what if they don't?" she asked.

"Waal, suppose you was to be found at the foot of the gulch stone dead, without a bullet hole or nothin'?" He paused, and she glanced back where from the narrow ledge on which she stood the rocky mountain side descended many hundreds of feet in a perpendicular line.

"Waal, when they found yer they'd say sure 'twas an accident, and, seein' I'd relocated the claim and was workin' on it, who'd dispute my title?"

"You miserable coward! Now I know who it was tried to murder Bert Leonard

and when he was on his way up to work his claim. It was no accident. The supports of the little wooden bridge over Pine creek were almost cut away, and when he rode on to it, of course, it went down with him and his horse."

"Waal, if it was me, who's goin' to prove it? And if I bungled that job I ain't a-goin' to queer this, don't you forget it. Now no more foolin'. See that rock over yonder on the trail? You go along till you reach it, then climb up and stand right on top of it."

Lee obeyed perforce, and as she slowly traversed the four hundred or so feet her mind was busy, but she could devise no way of escape. Above were the precipitous rocks, below the precipice, before the narrow trail, and behind was Pete Long ready to shoot if she attempted to run.

The rock indicated by Long jutted up from the very edge of the ledge, almost overhanging the abyss. The girl carefully climbed its rough sides and, reaching the apex, where there was just room for her feet, stood upright. A glance backward made her feet faint, and she turned toward the man.

"Don't be skeered!" he yelled. "I ain't a-goin' to hit yer."

He took deliberate aim, and the bullet cut the air within an inch of her overalls. The next passed between her ankles, a third whizzed just above her sombrero, and a fourth almost grazed her right hand. But Lee nerved herself, clinched her small teeth and stood as firm as the rock beneath her.

"Stands as stiddy as one of them stagers in the park down to Frisco," Long muttered. "Waal, I'll try somethin' else."

And, hoping thus to break her nerve, he took steady aim at her heart, and when she held her breath, expecting the end, he laid down the rifle, then picked it up again and pointed it directly at her face, then at her neck. Finally he fired again, the bullet grazing her jumper, but leaving no mark, a second striking and splintering the rock at her feet.

Still she stood firm, but she knew she could not hold out much longer, and death seemed almost welcome. Then, as Long again played with his weapon, aiming at one vital spot and then at another, a faint, awful hope crept into her consciousness.

When, startled by the sound of Long's hammering, Lee had run from the tunnel to learn the cause, she had just put in her last blast and had lighted the fuse, a very long one, for she could never quite overcome her fear of the blasting. In her haste, as she now remembered, she had left all the explosives in the tunnel over which Long was standing, and—and the long fuse must be nearly burned out.

"I'll end this thing one way or another pretty quick," muttered Long as he fired again. "I'm gettin' tired of this."

As the bullet whizzed past her it seemed to Lee that the earth heaved beneath the man's feet, and, following a blind instinct of self preservation, she slid from the rock and fell face downward on the ledge. Then an awful reverberation echoed through the canyon. Rocks flew above and around her, a fragment of one striking her as she lay half stunned, making a scalp wound which caused the blood to trickle down her face.

When a few moments later she dared to raise her head she saw something lying on the trail which told her that she was alone on the mountain, and, clasping her temples with both hands to guard her eyes from other sights, like a hunted deer she sped down the trail.

### Lee's Answer.

Early in the war between the states, before General Lee had demonstrated his pre-eminence as the southern leader, he was severely criticised on more than one occasion by a certain General Whiting. Whiting had stood at the head of his class at West Point and was considered not only by himself, but by others, as a very bright and capable man. One day President Davis, wishing an officer for some highly important command, called upon General Lee for advice.

"What do you think of Whiting?" asked Davis.

Lee answered without hesitation, commending Whiting as one of the ablest men in the army, well qualified in every way for even the most responsible position. One of the officers present was greatly surprised and at the first opportunity drew Lee aside.

"Don't you know what unkind things Whiting has been saying about you?" he inquired.

Lee's answer was of the best.

"I understood," he said, "that the president desired to know my opinion of Whiting, not Whiting's opinion of me."

### Ceremony.

I think there is a great deal of difference between that species of ceremony which exists with acquaintance and that which should always exist with the best of friends—the one prevents the growth of affection, the other preserves in in youth and age.—Letters of Maria Edgeworth.

### Belief.

Figge—You'll generally find that people believe what they want to believe. Fogge—Yes, and probably that accounts for the belief in everlasting punishment—for other people, of course—being so popular.

Were we eloquent as angels, yet we should please some people more by listening than by talking.—Cicero.

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